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Voices from a Southern Prison

Lloyd C. Anderson



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Rats, tainted food, leaky sewage pipes: they only began to hint at the anarchy inside the Kentucky State Reformatory in La Grange. A barracks-style "warehouse" prison straight out of an old mobster film, KSR was three-quarters over its intended capacity by 1978. It had become a sickening, dangerous place, where an inmate could get his hands on a sawed-off shotgun more easily than a clean towel.

That year a handful of KSR prisoners managed to send a plea for help to the federal court in Louisville. The petitioners expected reprisals or, maybe worse, silence. But the letter reached a caring judge, and the prisoners had spoken up at a crucial moment in Kentucky reform politics. The signs seemed right to take on the old-boy network whose byword on prison conditions was "ain't no riots, ain't no problems." The suit was settled in the KSR prisoners' favor in 1981, paving the way for controversial, protracted, and expensive reforms.

Written by Lloyd C. Anderson, the head of the KSR prisoners' legal team, *Voices from a Southern Prison* quotes extensively from recollections of many players in the case, from the judge who presided over it to the journalist who put it in the headlines. Most important, we hear from three inmates who emerged as leaders among their fellow plaintiffs: James "Shorty" Thompson, Wilgus Haddix, and Walter Harris.

As our nation's penal system expands on an unprecedented scale, the KSR scandal offers timely lessons about entrenched attitudes toward prisons. Thus far, says Anderson, they seem lost on the strategists of our "War on Crime."

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